

The Radiant Mind

The nature of the mind and the subconscious according to Early Buddhism (an introduction)

[The spiritual potential of the human mind]

Essay and translations by Piya Tan ©2004

1 Introduction

This brief study of the nature of the mind and the subconscious in the light of early Buddhism is inspired by Peter Harvey's *The Selfless Mind* (1995), especially chapter 10 ("Bhavaṅga and the Brightly Shining Mind"), whose main points I have summarized here and added other relevant references and points of my own.

In this study we examine the early Buddhist teachings regarding the "radiant mind" or "brightly shining mind" (*pabhassara citta*) that exists whether the mind is defiled or is liberated. It is said that even an evil person destined for hell has a "radiant" mind but which is "covered up," so to speak with the defilements that obscure it [4]. Buddhaghosa refers to this radiant mind as "the naturally pure (*pakati parisuddha*) bhavaṅga, citta" (AA 1:61), but we shall look at this later [13]. The key references in the early canon to the radiant mind are as follows:

Pañihita Acchanna Vagga (A 1.5/1:8-10):¹ the nature of the mind. [4]

Accharā Saṅghāta Vagga (A 1.6/1:10-11):² lovingkindness is a quality of the radiant mind; [5]; the mind is radiant but is defiled by external defilements. [6]

Kilesa Sutta (S 46.33/5:92): the radiant mind does not arise on account of the five mental hindrances.

Jāta, rūpa Sutta (A 3.100.12/1:257): keeping up concentration, effort and equanimity in meditation keeps the mind radiant.

Upakkilesa Sutta (A 5.23/3:16): the radiant mind does not arise on account of the five mental hindrances; the radiant mind is the basis for superknowledge [direct knowledge].³ [13]

¹ "The chapter on the well-directed and the uncovered."

² "The chapter on the finger-snap."

³ **Superknowledge** (*abhiññā*). The Canon has a list of fivefold superknowledge or supernatural knowledge (*pañc-ābhiññā*), or what we might today call psychic powers or extrasensory perception (ESP) which are given in the *Sāmañña-phala S* (D 1:77 f) as: **1. psychic manifestations** (*iddhi, vidhā*) which are listed as multiple materialization, invisibility, going through solid objects, earth-diving, walking on water, sky-walking (to the extent of touching the moon and the sun), astral travel (up to Brahma's heaven)—included here are faith-healing, personal aura; psychokinesis or telekinesis (moving objects from a distance); also included here are other powers such as self-combustion (which is the result of the first kasina [Sn:P n22.9]). Of special interest here is **psychokinesis** (PK) of which there are 3 subspecies, ie PK involving (a) living things (LT): incl accelerating the growth rate of plants, eg the Ānanda Bodhi tree (J 4:228 f, Mbvs 58 ff) and levitation; (b) moving things (changing the course of a moving object); and (c) still things (eg spoon-bending). **2. The divine ear** (*dibba, sota*), ie clairaudience, the ability to hear speech and sounds from a great distance by paranormal means [Sn:P is2(2)]. **3. Mind-reading or thought-reading** (*para, citta, vijānanā*), ie telepathy, the perception of thought and mental states of another person by paranormal means. **4. Recollection of one's past lives** (*pubbe, nivāsā-nussati*), ie retrocognition. **5. The divine eye** (*dibba, cakkhu*), ie clairvoyance, the perception of objects and events by paranormal means—incl precognition, the perception of some future event which may be an act, a thought or an emotion; this is also known as the knowledge of the passing-away and arising of beings (*cutūpapāta, ñāṇa*; given at Vbh 334 as *sattānam cutūpapāte ñāṇa*). **Fivefold & sixfold superknowledge.** The **fivefold superknowledge** are also mentioned at S 2:216 (CPD 346h, PED 64c & PTC 51) but Woodward (and Se text & tr) gives "sixfold Superknowledge" (S:RW 2:146). Later Buddhist tradition often mentions 6 kinds of superknowledge, the 6th being: **6. Knowledge of the destruction of the influxes** (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), ie of the sense-desires (*kāma'āsava*), of becoming (*bhava'āsava*), of views (*diṭṭh'āsava*), and ignorance (*avijj'āsava*) (Vbh 334, cf S 2:121) which accompanies the attainment of awakening. By itself, this superknowledge is called "direct knowledge," since it is the understanding of true reality. See Sn:P n4:23c.1. **The sixfold superknowledge** is mentioned at D 3:281 where it stands as a sort of index at the end of the

It should be noted here that these passages on the radiant mind refer to the development of a concentrated state of mind that is free from defilements and ready for realization. In **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33), for example, it is said that when a meditator properly attends to the perception of light (*āloka, saññam manasikaroti*), he develops a mind that is full of radiance (*sappabhāsam cittam*).⁴ In **the Ayo,guḷa Sutta**, it is mentioned that even the Buddha's body is said to be "radiant" as a result of mental concentration (S 51.22).⁵ Upali Karunaratne, in his *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* entry on "Kilesa," explains that

what is meant by lustrous and pure mind (*pabhassara*) is not a state of mind which is absolutely pure, nor the pure mind which is synonymous with emancipation...pure only in the sense, and to the extent, that it is not disturbed or influenced by external stimuli. (1991c:219)

Before going on, let us briefly look at the background to the teaching of the radiant mind in terms of what constitutes the mind and how it works.

2 Volition

A standard link in the dependent arising cycle is that "With formations as condition, there is consciousness" (*sankhārā paccayā viññāṇam*).⁶ A detailed account of this is given in **the Cetanā Sutta 2** (S 12.39):

And, bhikshus, what one intends, and what one plans, and what lies latent (in the mind)—this becomes a basis for the maintenance of consciousness. When there is a basis, there is a support for the establishing of consciousness. When consciousness is established and grows, there is a descent of name-and-form.⁷

With name-and-form as condition, there are the six sense-bases.

With the six sense-bases as condition, contact.

With contact as condition, feeling,

With feeling as condition, craving.

With craving as condition, clinging.

With clinging as condition, existence.

With existence as condition, birth.

Dīgha, and belongs to the very end of the Nikāya period, but it is based on older materials (PED). Each of the six, not called *abhiññā*, is separately described in various parts of the canon (eg D 1:89::D:R 1:89 f, M 1:34; S 2:121 212, A 1:255 258 = 3:17 280 = 4:421). The adj *cha-lābhiññā* (endowed with the sixfold superknowledge) is found at V 2:16 S 1:191 and Pug 14. At S 5:282 190 the sixfold superknowledge is mentioned in glosses to the text, and at S 2:217 222, a monk claims the sixfold superknowledge. Cf 2:11 3:96. Three of the sixfold superknowledge (nos 4-6) are given at M 1:22 f. They are said to have been attained by the Buddha in the 3 watches of the night with the verbs *anussarati* (no 4), *pajānāti* (no 5), *abhijānāti* (no 6), each signifying a higher stage of liberating knowledge, yet all are called *vijjā* (knowledge).

⁴ D 33.1.11(5c)/3:223.

⁵ S 51.22/5:283.

⁶ Eg (**Paṭicca,samuppāda**) **Desanā S** (S 12.1/2:1 f) and **Kaccā(ya)na,gotta S** (S 12.15/2:16 f).

⁷ *Yañ ca bhikkhave ceteti yañ ca pakappeti yañ ca anuseti, ārammaṇam etaṃ hoti viññāṇassa ṭhitiyā. Ārammaṇe sati patiṭṭhitā viññāṇassa hoti. Tasmim patiṭṭhite viññāṇe virūḷhe nāma,rūpassa avakkanti hoti.* Cf **Moḷiya Phaggu-na S** (S 12.12/2:12-14) [7], where the production of future rebirth is placed between consciousness and the six sense-bases. These 2 suttas imply that the "descent of name-and-form" and the "production of future rebirth" are interchangeable (in spite of the consistent commentarial view of the latter as karmically active existence). Comy says that there is a link (*sandhi*) between consciousness and name-and-form (SA 2:62). Bodhi: "[T]hus on this interpretation consciousness denotes the karmically generative consciousness of the previous existence, name-and-form the beginning of the present existence. It seems to me, however, more likely that *viññāṇa* straddles both the past life and the present life, as the principle of personal continuity" (S:B 761 n115). For comy on this passage, see S:B 757 nn112-116

With birth as condition, decay-and-death, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering. (S 12.39/2:66)

All our conscious actions are the constructing activities of the mind, and at the root of this constructing is **the will or volition** (*cetanā*). In the Suttas, it is stated to be the same as karma:

Bhikkhus, volition [the will] is karma, I say. Having willed, one creates karma through the body, through speech, through the mind.⁸ (A 63.11/3:415)

In other words, volition initiates a conscious action, The Abhidhamma explains this in more detail:

It wills, thus it is volition; “it collects” is the meaning.

Its characteristic is the state of volition. Its function is to strive. It is manifested as co-ordination.

It accomplishes its own and other’s functions, like a senior pupil, a master carpenter, etc, does.

But it is evident when it occurs in the strengthening of associated states in connection with urgent work, remembering and so on.⁹ (Vbh 463)

The Attha,sālinī (the Commentary to the Dhamma,saṅgaṇī) likens volition to a cultivator directing strong men at harvest time, or a head pupil who, on seeing the teacher approaching, himself recites his lessons and makes other pupils recite each his own lesson (DhsA 111).

In this sense, volition seems quite close to **thought** (*citta*)¹⁰ as in the statement:

The world, bhikkhus, is led by thought (*citta*). It is dragged along by thought. When a thought arises, it [the world] goes under its power.¹¹ (A 4.186/2:177)

3 Dhammapada verse 1-2

This statement suggests that volition is closely connected with consciousness, and that volition is the main factor in turning consciousness into a thought, idea or habit.¹² This is further reflected in the first two verses of **the Dhammapada**:

The mind (*mano*) precedes all mental states;
The mind is supreme; mind-made are they:
If, with a defiled mind (*paduṭṭhena*), one speaks or acts,
Suffering follows one like a wheel that dogs a draught ox’s foot.¹³ (Dh 1)

The mind (*mano*) precedes all mental states;
The mind is supreme; mind-made are they:
If, with a pure (*pasannena*) mind, one speaks or acts,
Happiness follows one like a shadow that leaves not.¹⁴ (Dh 2)

⁸ *Cetanā’haṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi, cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā.*

⁹ *Cetayati ti cetanā; abhisandahati ti attho. Sā cetanā, bhāva, lakkhaṇā, āyuhana, rasā, samvidahana, paccupaṭṭhānā, sakkicca, parakkicca, sādhiḱā jeṭṭha, sissa, mahā, vaḍḍhakī, ādayo viya. Accāyika, kammānussaraṇādisu ca paṇāyamā sampayuttamā ussāhana, bhāvena pavattamānā pākaṭā hoti.*

¹⁰ On *citta*, see Harvey 1995:111 ff (ch 7).

¹¹ *Cittena kho bhikkhu loko niyyati cittena parikissati cittassa uppannassa vasam gacchati ti.*

¹² Harvey, 1995:264.

¹³ *Mano, pubb’añgamā dhammā mano, seṭṭhā mano, mayā | manasā ce paduṭṭhena bhasati vā karoti vā | tato nam dukkham anveti cakkam va vahato padam.*

¹⁴ *Mano, pubb’añgamā dhammā mano, seṭṭhā mano, mayā | manasā ce pasannena bhasati vā karoti vā | tato nam sukham anveti chāyā va anāpayinī.*

The **Dhammapad’atthakathā** (Commentary on the Dhammapada) explains “**mental states**” (*dhammā*) as the “formless aggregates” (*arūpino khandhā*), that is, feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and formations (*saṅkhāra*). The term “preceded by the mind” (*mano, pubb’āṅgamā*) also occurs in two short suttas in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A 1.6.6-7/1:11), reflecting similar sentiments as Dhammapada 1-2.

Here “**mind**” (*mano*) refers to the intention. While the mind does not actually precede the wholesome and unwholesome states in a temporal sense, it is said to arise first because it is a volition or intention that determines the ethical quality of the deeds that issue from the mind.

(Bodhi, A:ÑB 278 n15)

The Dhammapada Commentary says that *mano* is a term for “thought [conscious moment]” (*citta*) on all the four levels (of being).¹⁵ However, here it specifically refers to “a thought connected with mental displeasure associated with repulsion” (*domanassa, saḥagata, paṭigha, sampayutta, citta*), that is, a mentally hostile reaction due to dislike (DhA 1:21 f). In explaining the word “**defiled**” (*paduṭṭhena*), the Commentary says:

It is defiled by adventitious faults [“arriving” at the sense-doors] such as covetousness (*āgantukehi abhijjhādīhi dosehi*). The “natural mind” (*pakati, mano*) is the *bhavaṅga, citta*,¹⁶ which is undefiled. Just as clear water is tainted by (such colours as) blue and so on, flowing into it and becomes known as “blue water,” and so on, but not so the earlier clear water (before it was tainted by the colour) nor new (fresh) water.

In the same way, thought too becomes tainted by adventitious ills, such as covetousness and so on, but not the earlier *bhavaṅga, citta* nor a new thought (*navam cittaṃ*). Hence, the Blessed One said,

“Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, but it is defiled by impurities that arrive (through the sense-doors)” [A 1:10].
(DhA 1:23)¹⁷

4 Panihita Acchanna Vagga (A 1.5)

The **Panihita Acchanna Vagga** (A 1.5/1:8-10)¹⁸ is a short remarkable chapter of sayings and similes by the Buddha on *the nature of the mind*. The main points of the chapter are as follows:

- (1) Just as the awn [spike] of sali rice (*sāli, sūka*)¹⁹ or the awn of barley (*yava, sūka*), when well directed, will pierce the hand and draw blood, even so the mind (*citta*), when well directed, will pierce spiritual ignorance, draw knowledge, and realize nirvana. (A 1.5.1-2/1:8)
- (2) A person whose mind is impure and restless will be reborn in a hell realm but one who is “clear-minded” (*pasanna citta*) will be reborn in a heaven state. (A 1.5.3-4/1:8 f)
- (3) A monk with an unsullied (*anāvīḷa*) mind—like a person with good eyes, (looking) from the edge of a clear, limpid, unsullied pool, would see shellfish and shells, or gravel and pebbles,

¹⁵ That is, the sense realm, the form realm, the formless realm, and the supramundane realm, Pm 1:83. BDict on *mano*: “Mind, is in the Abhidhamma used as a synonym of *viññāna* (consciousness) and *citta* (state of consciousness, mind). According to the [Vism Comy], it sometimes means sub-consciousness (see *bhavaṅga-sota*).” Here, however, I have rendered *citta* as “thought.”

¹⁶ Often tr as “life-continuum,” ie the underlying stream of consciousness that supervenes whenever active consciousness lapses, most notably in deep dreamless sleep. See A:ÑB 278 n13.

¹⁷ See *Viññāna* = SD 17.8a(4.5).

¹⁸ “The chapter on the well-directed and the uncovered.”

¹⁹ Rice as *vīhi* (P *vīhi*) (*Oryza sativa*) had its origins in India around 3000 BCE and was certainly known to later Vedic people. It was a rainy season crop ripening in autumn but whose yield was limited. The change came when the people learned and used the art of **paddy transplantation** or wet paddy production, which was grown as a winter crop. This kind of rice was known as *sāli* (P *sāli*) (R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, 1983:96, 161f.).

or shoals of fish moving about or resting in it²⁰—understands what is conducive to the true welfare of himself and of others, and realizes the superhuman states,²¹ the knowledge and vision of the noble ones [the state of clear calm and liberating insight that are the fruit of the spiritual life]. (A 1.5.5-6/1:9 abridged)

(4) “I see no other single thing that when cultivated and developed is as pliable (*modu*) and workable (*kammaññam*) as this mind. Bhikshus, the mind that is thus cultivated and developed (through meditation) is pliable and workable.” (A 1.5.7/1:9)

(5) “Bhikshus, I see no single thing that is so quick to change²² as the mind. It is not easy here to give a simile as to how quickly the mind changes” (A 1.5.8/1:10).²³

(6) “Bhikshus, this mind is radiant (*pabhassara*), but it is defiled by adventitious impurities [that ‘arrive’ through the sense-doors].”²⁴ (A 1.5.9-10/1:10) (A 1.5/1:8-10)

Even an evil person destined for hell has a “radiant” mind but which is “covered up” (*channa*), so to speak, with the defilements that obscure it. Buddhaghosa refers to this “uncovered” (*acchanna*) radiant mind as “the naturally pure (*pakati parisuddha bhavaṅga, citta*)” (AA 1:61).²⁵ However, when this mind is trained and cultivated, it comes close to the radiant mind, even revealing it, and in that way bringing one to higher spiritual stages and away from such suffering states. Since the mind is “quick to change” one can turn it towards a wholesome state at any time.

5 Accharā Sutta (A 1.6.3-5)

There is an important implication here, especially in **the Cūḷ’accharā Sutta** (A 1.6.3-5)²⁶ that immediately follows in the next chapter of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Accharā Saṅghāta Vagga (The Finger-snap Chapter) (A 1.5/1:8-10).

Bhikshus, if even for just the moment of a finger-snap a monk associates with (*āseveti*)...cultivates (*bhāveti*)...pays attention (*manasikaroti*) to a thought of lovingkindness, he is called a monk. His meditation is not in vain. He acts in accordance with the Teacher’s teaching. He follows his advice. He does not eat the country’s alms in vain.²⁷ How much more so if he were to often cultivate it! (A 1.6.3-5/1:10)

²⁰ The simile: *udaka,rahado accho vipasanno anāvilo tattha cakkhumā puriso tīre thito passeyya sippi,sambukam pi sakkhara,kaṭhalam pi maccha,gumbam pi carantam pi tiṭṭhantam pi*. The whole para also in **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2.98/ 1:84) in the same context, differently worded.

²¹ “The superhuman state,” *uttari,manussa,dhamma*, While the highest of ordinary human virtues are the 5 precepts, the 10 precepts, the 10 wholesome courses of actions (*kusala.kamma,patha*) (**Sammā Ditṭhi S**, M 9.6/1:47; **Sāleyyaka S**, M 41.12-14/ 1:288), **the virtues of the saints**, called “the superhuman states,” include the dhyanas (*jhāna*), the superknowledges (*abhiññā*), and the paths (*magga*) and fruits (*phala*) (DA 2:388, 3:817; MA 2:21; AA 1:3:412). **The Vinaya** includes the dhyanas in its definition of *uttari,manussa,dhamma* (V 3:92, 4:24).

²² “So quick to change,” *lahu,parivattam*, lit “light to turn.” See AA 3:317; or “arising quickly, ceasing quickly (AA 1:59).

²³ *Nāham bhikkhave aññam eka,dhammam pi samanupassāmi yam evam lahu,parivattam yatha-y-idam cittam yāvañ c’idam bhikkhave upamā pi na sukarā yāva lahuka,parivattam cittam ti*.

²⁴ For Pali, see §6 below.

²⁵ A canonical example of how the radiant mind gets “covered up” is found in **Aggañña S** (D 27) where during the re-evolution of the world, the Abhassara devas lost their radiance through consuming “sweet earth” (D 27.10b-12/3:84 f). See Harvey 1995:177-179.

²⁶ See **SD 2.13**, ch 3.

²⁷ Comy say that there are 4 ways in which a monk uses his alms: (1) an immoral monk uses them (undeservedly) like a thief; (2) a virtuous ordinary person who does not reflect on them is like a debtor; (3) a trainee (*sekhā*, ie one of the 7 Saints, short of the arhat-become) uses them as an inheritance; (4) an arhat uses them as a proper owner.

The implication of the teachings of the **Paṇihita Acchanna Vagga** [4] is that lovingkindness (*mettā*) is a quality of the radiant mind. The **Accharā Sutta** clearly confirms that when the mind is directed to a wholesome thought, one connected with lovingkindness, even for a brief moment,²⁸ it is always of great benefit.

In other words, the radiant mind that is waiting to be “uncovered” is already endowed with loving-kindness. As such, it is said that the liberation of mind through lovingkindness “shines, blazes, radiates” (*bhāsate ca tapate ca virocati ca*) and is like the radiance of the sun or of the moon (It 19 f).

6 Pabhassara Sutta (A 1.6.1-2)

The Pabhassara Sutta,²⁹ found in the **Accharā Saṅghāta Vagga**³⁰ of the *Ānguttara*, is another short remarkable text where the Buddha declares that our mind is intrinsically pure and bright (*pabhassara*), that is to say, our “original nature” is that of good and light. In other words, we are not born in sin and that evil is not in our nature. Understandably, since evil is not our nature, to persist in committing evil would only bring on conflict or suffering. As such, the purpose of the spiritual life is for one to return to this innate “original” pure goodness.

- 1 Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, but it is defiled by adventitious impurities [impurities that “arrive” through the sense-doors].
The uninstructed [ignorant] ordinary person does not understand things as they really are. Therefore there is no mental development for the uninstructed ordinary person, I say!³¹
- 2 Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, and it is freed from adventitious impurities [impurities that “arrive” through the sense-doors].
The instructed [wise] noble disciple understands things as they really are. Therefore there is mental development for the instructed noble disciple, I say!³²
(A 1.6.1-2/1:10; also 1.5.9-10/1:10; MA 1:167)

The Manoratha, pūraṇī (*Ānguttara* Commentary) says that “the mind” (*citta*) here refers to the *bhavaṅga, citta*, the life-continuum or underlying stream of consciousness that supervenes whenever active consciousness lapses, most notably in deep dreamless sleep. The “adventitious impurities” (*āgantukā upakkilesā*) are greed, hate and delusion,³³ which appear at the stage of the cognitive process which, in later Buddhism, is called “impulsion” (*javana*). The Commentary says that the impurities do not arise with the life-continuum, but “arrive” later, at the impulsion phase (AA 1:63).

The “radiant mind” (*pabhassara citta*) does not refer to any eternal mind-essence or enduring entity. This is obvious from an important statement that precedes this sutta:

Bhikshus, I see a single thing that changes so rapidly as the mind. It is not easy here to give a simile as to how rapidly the mind changes. (A 1.5.8/1:10)

Here the Commentary explains that the mind (a moment of consciousness) rapidly arises and passes away (AA 1:59).

Bodhi notes that the same expression is used elsewhere in the Pali Canon in a context that suggests the intended meaning is the mind’s vulnerability to quick changes in intention and preferences (A:NB 278 n12). The *Vinaya*, for example, records a number of provisions for a monk to break his rains retreat, if he

²⁸ Another such text is **Okkhā S** (S 20.4/2:264) = SD 2.14.

²⁹ A 1.6.1-2/1:10.

³⁰ A 1.4-5/1:8-10, “The chapter on the finger-snap.”

³¹ *Pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭham. Taṃ assutavā puthujano yathā, bhūtaṃ n’ appajānati. Tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa citta, bhāvanā n’ atthi ti vadāmi ti.* Qu at MA 1:167; DhA 1:23; NmA 1:22; PmA 1:242; DhsA 68.

³² *Pabhassaram idaṃ bhikkhave cittaṃ taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vippamuttam. Taṃ sutavā ariya, sāvako yathā, bhūtaṃ pajānati. Tasmā sutavato ariya, sāvakassa citta, bhāvanā atthi ti vadāmi ti.*

³³ For other examples of impurities (*upakkilesa*), see (**Anuruddha**) **Upakkilesa S** (M 128) = SD 8.2. See also Harvey 1995:167 f.

is in danger of falling from his holy life (that is, breaking of monastic rules), such as receiving gifts of cattle, or a slave, or a woman, or even finding “a treasure without an owner.” For the mind is quick to change; here, meaning the monk could be tempted to fall from his training if he does not flee from that place. (Mv 3.11.3-4/V 1:150)

Furthermore, (5) “how quickly the mind changes” should be well noted, as it is referred to in the following sentence. The phrase, “this mind” (*idam...cittam*), in (6) refers back to the quick-changing mind in (5). In other words, it does not refer to any permanent state, such as “radiant mind” or “pure bright mind” like the Mahāyāna *tathāgata, garbha*.³⁴

Ñāṇananda, makes an important observation in *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (1971). After noting that the Vijñānavādins posit a “store consciousness” (*ālaya, vijñāna*), he says:

Yet in the Pali Canon there is no suggestion of an absolute mind as the Ultimate Reality as in the case of Vijñānavāda. Even the *viññāna* finally ceases at the death of the emancipated-one since it is just one of the five aggregates.

Abhedī kāyo, nirodhi saññā, vedanā sītirahaṃsu sabbā, vūpasamīṃsu saṅkhārā, viññāṇam attham agamā. (U 93)

“The body broke up, perception ceased, all feelings cooled off, volitional activities calmed down and *consciousness came to an end*.”

Moreover, the reference to a mind intrinsically pure is not to be confused with the idea of an absolute entity, like a soul, already embedded in every being. The luminosity of the mind is a *potentiality* which becomes a reality only when the necessary conditions are fulfilled. These conditions are collectively called *bhāvanā*, a word which even literally suggests growth. It is significant that this Aṅguttara passage referred to above, is in point of fact, an exhortation stressing the importance of *bhāvanā* (development of mind). Thus, according to the Pāli Nikāyas, one has to “grow” into the luminosity of the mind. It is not something pre-existing in some metaphysical sense, ready to be traced metaphysically to the seed of the plant. It has to blossom forth in order to be a lotus. (1971: 114 f; 1979: 128 f)³⁵

7 Mental dhyana and the radiant mind

The Sāmañña,phala Sutta (D 2) has this well known stock passage describing the fourth dhyana:

And furthermore, maharajah, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain—and with the earlier disappearance of joy and grief—he enters and abides in **the fourth dhyana**, that is neither pleasant nor painful and contains mindfulness fully purified by equanimity. He sits, pervading the body with a pure, bright mind, so that there is no part of his entire body that is not pervaded by a pure, bright mind. (D 2.81/1:75) = SD 8.10

It is clear from this passage that when the meditator attains to the fourth dhyana, he becomes directly aware of the truly and naturally pure nature of the mind. At this stage, the mental reflex (*nimitta*) in the meditator’s mind is very clear, stable and incredibly radiant. The mental reflex as meditation teachers often say is an image of the meditator’s own mind. When one experiences such an image in meditation, one recognizes it as the radiant mind of **the Pabhassara Sutta** (A 1.6.1-2).

³⁴ GC Pande: “Although *vijñāna* is particular and transient it remains the prime mover and the central focus of experience. The tendency to regard the world as an illusion grounded in a noumenal and infinite *vijñāna* produced *vijñānavāda* and brought it near to Vedānta, too.” *Studies in Mahāyāna*, 1993 ch 3 (Vision and philosophy).

³⁵ On the issue of *viññāṇam anidassanam anantam sabbato, pabham*, see **Brahma, nimantanika S** (M 49.25/-1:329) & SD 11.7 Intro (8). On the unestablished consciousness, see **Viññāṇa** = SD 17.8a(11.3).

The mental reflex is radiant because the mind is free from the adventitious impurities that visit and intrude into the mind, that is, to say, the mental hindrances.³⁶ This radiant mental reflex, in other words, is the entrance to dhyana. When one understands this, then one truly understands “mental cultivation.”³⁷

When one emerges from a dhyana, the life-continuum arises again in one’s mind. Let us now examine the radiant mind in connection with *bhavaṅga, citta*.

Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta

(M 38/1:258-260)

8 Does early Buddhism teach *bhavaṅga, citta*?

The crucial feature of the life-continuum (*bhavaṅga, citta*) is that it seems to be a form of consciousness that is other than those that arise with the six sense-bases. In this connection, it might be asked whether an important passage in **the Mahā Taṇhā, saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38.5b-8/1:258-260)³⁸ rules out such a concept. The monk Sāti, the fisherman’s son, holds the wrong view that “it is this same consciousness,³⁹ not another, that runs and flows through the rounds of births.”⁴⁰

Sāti’s wrong view

5b The Blessed One then asked him:

“Sāti, is it true that the following evil false view has arisen in you: ‘As I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness, not another, that runs and wanders through the rounds of births.’?”

“That is very true, venerable sir. As I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness, not another, that runs and wanders through the rounds of births.”

5c “**What is this consciousness, Sāti?**”

“Venerable sir, it is that which speaks and feels here and there; it feels the results of good and evil deeds.”⁴¹

“Misguided one,⁴² to whom have you ever known me teach the Dharma in that way? Misguided one, have I not stated in many ways that consciousness is dependently arisen,⁴³ that without a condition there is no arising of consciousness?

But you, misguided one, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp and injured⁴⁴ yourself, and stored up much demerit—for, this will bring you harm and suffering for a long time.”

³⁶ “Mental hindrances” (*nīvaraṇā*), ie sensual lust (*kāma-c, chanda*), ill will (*vyāpāda*), sloth and torpor (*thīna, -middha*), restless and worry (*uddhacca, kukkuccha*), and doubt (*vicikicchā*). See (**Nīvaraṇa**) **Saṅgārava S** (S 46.55) = SD 3.12.

³⁷ See Brahmavamso, 2003:37.

³⁸ See SD 7.10 & also Harvey 1995:155 ff (ch 10).

³⁹ “Consciousness,” *viññāṇa*. On its def, see Johansson, 1965:189-215. On *viññāṇa* as a link in dependent arising, see (**Paṭicca, samuppāda**) **Vibhaṅga S** (Sn 12.2/2:2-4).

⁴⁰ “It is this same consciousness, ... the rounds of births,” *tad ev’idaṃ viññāṇaṃ sandhāvati saṃsarati anaññan ti*.

⁴¹ As in **Sabb’āsava S** (M 2.8/1:8) where it is one of a number of examples of *diṭṭhi, gata*. This statement by Sāti is his second wrong view, the first being stated in §3.

⁴² *Mogha, purisa*, lit “empty person”. I’ve followed a safe well-tested translation here. However, while *mogha* evokes more deeply a spiritual lack, “misguided” connotes more of psychosocial errancy. Cf TS Eliot’s “Hollow Men” (where “empty men” is also mentioned) which fully brings out the meaning here but lacks emotional connection for those unfamiliar with the poem.

⁴³ “Consciousness is dependently arisen,” *paṭicca, samuppannaṃ viññāṇaṃ*. Cf **Mahā Hatthi, padôpama S** (M 28): “These five aggregates of clinging are dependently arisen.” (M 28.28/1:191).

Consciousness is dependently arisen

7 Then the Blessed One addressed the monks thus:⁴⁵

“Bhikshus, do you understand the Dharma taught by me as this monk, Sāti, [259] the fisherman’s son, does when he misrepresents us by his wrong grasp and injures himself and stores up much demerit?”

“No, venerable sir. For in many ways the Blessed One has stated how consciousness is dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no arising of consciousness.”

“Good, bhikshus. It is good that you understand the Dharma taught by me thus. For in many ways I have spoken on how consciousness is dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no arising of consciousness.

But this monk Sāti, the fisherman’s son, misrepresents us by his wrong grasp, and injures himself and stores up much demerit. For this will lead to this misguided one’s harm and pain for a long time.

Conditionality of consciousness

8a Bhikshus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises.

When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness.

When consciousness arises dependent on the ear and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness.

When consciousness arises dependent on the nose and smells, it is reckoned as nose-consciousness.

When consciousness arises dependent on the tongue and tastes, it is reckoned as tongue-consciousness.

When consciousness arises dependent on the body and touches, it is reckoned as body-consciousness.

When consciousness arises dependent on the mind and mind-objects, it is reckoned as mind-consciousness.

8b Just as **fire** is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it burns:⁴⁶

when fire burns dependent on wood, it is reckoned as “wood fire”;

when fire burns dependent on wood chips, it is reckoned as “wood-chip fire”;

when fire burns dependent on grass, it is reckoned as “grass fire”;

when fire burns dependent on cow-dung, it is reckoned as “cow-dung fire”;

⁴⁴ “Injured,” *khaṇasi*, 2nd p sg of *khaṇati*: (1) hurts, injures; impairs (V 2:26 = M 1:132; D 1:86; S 1:27; A 1:89, 3:350; Tha 1173); (2) digs; digs up excavates (V 3:48, 76, 4:32; M 2:51; S 1:127; A 4:159; Dh 247, 337; U 15). There is a wordplay here: Sāti harms himself with wrong view, and also dig up his wholesome roots.

⁴⁵ Comy on **Alaggadūpama S** notes that by questioning the other monks, the Buddha wants to clarify the Sangha’s view and to leave no doubt in Ariṭṭha that through his mindset, he had alienated himself from the Sangha. (MA 2:105). Compatibility of view (*diṭṭhi,sāmaññatā*) is the last of the 6 qualities constituting the virtues for the spiritual community (*sāraṇīya,dhamma*, D 3:245, A 3:288 f), the first 5 being: showing lovingkindness in deed, in speech, and in thought; communal sharing, compatibility of moral virtue. However, despite Sāti’s alienation, no disciplinary measure is put upon him. Instead, the Buddha actually clarifies the situation before the assembly in Sāti’s presence which apparently would benefit him in due course. See **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 38) = SD 7.10 Introd (5).

⁴⁶ The following are the fuel mentioned above for the fire in Pali: *kaṭṭha* (wood, stick, twig), *sakalika* (splinter, chip), *tiṇa* (grass), *go,maya* (cow-dung), *thusa* (chaff), *saṅkāra* (rubbish, refuse). The Pali word for “fuel,” *upādāna*, also means “clinging”, since clinging adds fuel to our craving (*taṇhā*). Our desire works closely with our self-view and self-identity: in fact, we are what we desire. “Monks, one having sensual desires is reborn as an individual (*atta,bhāva*) into this or that existence depending on one’s merit or on one’s demerit.” (**Nibbedhika (Pariyāya) S**, A 6.63.4c/3:411).

when fire burns dependent on chaff, it is reckoned as “chaff fire”;
 when fire burns dependent on refuse, it is reckoned as “refuse fire”;
 even so, too, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises.

When consciousness arises dependent on the eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye consciousness....

[260] When consciousness arises dependent on the mind and mind-objects, it is reckoned as mind-consciousness.”

The sections 5b and 7-8 of the **Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta** (M 38) are key passage where the Buddha declares the dependent arising of consciousness and applies the fire simile—which appears to rule out the concept of the “life-continuum” (*bhavaṅga*), well known in the Abhidhamma tradition. The fire simile might be seen to imply that, *just as there is no latent, non-burning, form of fire, so there is no latent form of consciousness*, apart from its six forms arising dependent on a sense-organ and sense-object.

However, **Peter Harvey**⁴⁷ argues that the simile should be understood against the Buddha’s Indian milieu (1995:156). **FO Shrader** has pointed out the relevance of Upanishadic ideas of fire to Buddhist similes, asserting that such ideas:

[T]he common Indian view is, since the oldest times, that an expiring flame does not really go out, but returns into the primitive, pure, invisible state of fire it had before it’s appearance as visible fire.⁴⁸ (Shrader 1904-05:167)

RH Robinson similarly asserts that traditional Indians viewed fire as “an indestructible element latent in every bright or warm thing, but especially in fuel. It alternates between manifestation and ‘going home’ to its occult source” (1970:38 f, 1982:44). In a footnote, Harvey however cautions that

Buddhism would not, of course, accept fire as an “indestructible element” but would see it as an element in flux; this would certainly be the Abhidhamma perspective. Nevertheless, some instance of the element would always be present in a material object, so this makes little difference to the general idea of fire. (Harvey 1995:467 n2)

The fire simile of the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta [8ab] (M 1:259 f), then, concludes Harvey,

is to be understood against the background of such ideas. This means that the text does not rule out a latent form of discernment [consciousness], but indirectly alludes to it: just as “different and changing forms of fire arise from the latent form of fire dependent on certain fuels, so different and changing sorts of discernment [consciousness] arise from a latent source dependent on certain sense-organs and sense-objects. (Harvey 1995:157 (§10.5))

As such, the Mahā Taṇhā,saṅkhaya Sutta teaches **the conditionality of consciousness** (*viññāṇa*). Consciousness, in other words, is not an entity (like an immortal “soul” or enduring “substance”) trans-migrating life after life, but it is a “stream of consciousness” (*viññāṇa,sota*).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Harvey 1995:95 f (§6.13) & 155-160 (ch 10).

⁴⁸ For example, Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.13: *Vahner yathā yoni,gatasya mūrtir na drśyate n’aiva ca liṅga,nā-saḥ...* The **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36) contains the famous parable of the fire-sticks (M 36.17/1:240 f): see SD 1.12. Even so late a text as **Milinda,pañha** contains this passage: “Sire, just as there is what is called fire, though there is not place for storing it up, a man, rubbing two sticks together, obtains fire’ even so, though there is no place for storing nirvana, sire, but there is this nirvana, whereby one practising rightly by means of skillful attention realizes nirvana.” (Miln 327)

⁴⁹ This is a rare term in the Canon, found only in **Sampasādanīya S** (D 28.7/3:105) which probably refers to the better known commentarial term, *bhavaṅga* (“life-continuum” or the sub-unconscious) or *bhavaṅga,sota* (sub-conscious stream). See BDict: bhavaṅga & Ency Bsm: bhavaṅga.

9 The Bīja Sutta**Bīja Sutta**

[The discourse on seeds]

How consciousness grows and proliferates

(S 22.54/3:54 f)

1 At Sāvathī.**2** “Bhikshus, there are these five ways of plant propagation (*bīja, jāta*). What are the five?”**3** Propagation from roots, from stems, from cuttings, from joints and from seeds as the fifth.⁵⁰**4** Bhikshus, if these five kinds of plant-parts [“plant-seeds”] are not broken, not rotten, undamaged by wind or sun, viable,⁵¹ properly planted in well-prepared soil in a good field, but if there were no proper and timely rain;⁵² then, bhikshus, would these seeds would sprout and grow in abundance?”

“No, venerable sir.”

5 “Bhikshus, if these five kinds of plant-parts were broken, rotten, damaged by wind or sun, unviable, improperly planted in well-prepared soil, but there were earth and water; then, bhikshus, would these seeds would sprout and grow in abundance?”

“No, venerable sir.”

6 “Bhikshus, if these five kinds of plant-parts are not broken, not rotten, undamaged by wind or sun, viable, properly planted in well-prepared soil in a good field, and there were proper and timely rain; then, bhikshus, would these seeds would sprout and grow in abundance?”

“Yes, venerable sir.”

7 “Even so, bhikshus, the four stations of consciousness⁵³ should be seen as *the earth element*.Even so, bhikshus, lustful delight⁵⁴ should be seen as *the water element*.Even so, bhikshus, consciousness together with its food⁵⁵ should be seen as *the five kinds of plant-parts [plant propagation]*.**8** Consciousness, bhikshus, while standing, would stand with form as basis,⁵⁶ [55] established upon form, following delight, would sprout, grow and increase abundantly.

⁵⁰ *Mūla, bījam khandha, bījam agga, bījam phalu, bījam, bīja, bījañ, ñeva pañcamam*. S:B erroneously follows the usual sequence of “seeds”, thus “Root-seed, stem-seeds, joint-seeds, cutting-seeds, and germ-seeds as the fifth” (S:B 891), where “joint-seeds” (*phalu, bīja*) and “cutting-seeds” (*agga, bīja*) should be reversed [7]. These are actually 5 means of vegetative propagation. SA 2:274 gives examples of the 5 kinds of propagations taken from V 4:34 f, where the following examples are given: (1) propagation from roots: turmeric, ginger, orris root, white orris root, garlic, black hellebore, khus-khus, nut-grass etd; (2) propagation from stems: the fig tree, the banyan tree, *pilakkha* (probably *Ficus infectoria*), *udumbara* (probably *Ficus glomerata*), the Indian cedar wood, the wood-apple, etc; (3) propagation from joints: sugar-cane, bamboo, reeds, etc; (4) propagation from cuttings: basil, camel-grass, *hirivela* (an andropogon), etc; (5) propagation from seeds: grain, pulses, etc (V 4:34 f). For a poetic version of the vegetation simile, see *Selā S* (S 5.9/1:134c = v550). For a comparison of consciousness to a seed, see *Bhava S* (A 3.76/1:223 f). For a comparison of karma to seeds, see (*Kamma Nidāna S* (A 3.33/ 1:134-136) = SD 4.14.

⁵¹ “Viable,” *sāradāni*, (of seeds) “fresh” (D 3:354=A3:404); fr *sārada*, “autumn”. Also fr *sāra*, “essence”.

⁵² “Proper and timely rain,” *devo ca sammā dhāraṇam*, lit “right and seasonable rain”.

⁵³ *Catasso viññāṇa-t, ṭhitiyo*. **The 4 stations of consciousness**, that is, *how* consciousness arises, are explained in *Saṅgīti S* (D 1.11(28)), as arising with the 4 mental aggregates, as follows: Consciousness gains a footing (1) by means (*upāya*) of form, with form as object (*ārammaṇa*)...; (2) by means of feeling, with feeling as object...; by means of perception, with perception as object...; (4) by means of formations, with formations as object—each seeking delight, it sprouts, grows, increases abundantly (D 1.11(18)/3:228). Elsewhere, **7 stations of consciousness**, that is, *where* consciousness arises, are given: (1) different in body, different in perception; (2) different in body, same in perception; (3) same in body, different in perception; (4) same in body, same in perception; (5) the sphere of the infinity of space; (6) the sphere of the infinity of consciousness; (7) the sphere of nothingness; (8) the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (D 15.33/2:69 = SD 5.13.33; D 3:253; A 7.41/4:39).

⁵⁴ *Nandī, rāga*. I take it as karmadharaya, although it can also be taken as a dvandva, as “lust and delight.”

⁵⁵ *Viññāṇam s’āhāram*.

9 Or, consciousness, bhikshus, while standing, might stand with feeling as basis,...

10 Or, consciousness, bhikshus, while standing, might stand with perception as basis,...

11 Or, consciousness, bhikshus, while standing, might stand with volitional formations as basis, established upon volitional formations, following delight, would sprout, grow and increase abundantly.

12 Bhikshus, if someone were to say, ‘Apart from form, apart from feeling, apart from perception, apart from volitional formations, I will make known the coming and going of consciousness, its passing away and rebirth, its sprouting, growth and increase in abundance’—that is impossible.

13 Bhikshus, if a monk has abandoned lust for the form element, with the abandoning of lust, the basis is cut off: there is no more support for the establishing of consciousness.

14 Bhikshus, if he has abandoned lust for the feeling element,...

15 Bhikshus, if he has abandoned lust for the perception element,...

16 Bhikshus, if he has abandoned lust for the volitional formations element,...

17 Bhikshus, if he has abandoned lust for the consciousness element, with the abandoning of lust the basis is cut off: there is no more support for the establishing of consciousness.

18 When that consciousness is unestablished, not growing, not generating, it is liberated; being liberated, it is stable; being stable, it is content; being content, it is not agitated. Being unagitated, he personally attains nirvana.

He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth. The holy life has been lived. What needs to be done has been done. There is no more of this state of being.’” (S 22.54/3:54 f) = SD 8.3 (9)

10 Analysis of the Bija Sutta⁵⁷

In the Bija Sutta, “**consciousness together with its food**” (*viññāṇam s’āhāram*) corresponds to the five kinds of plant propagation or “seeds” (*bīja,jāta*). It is clear that the four kinds of food (*āhāra*) are meant here, that is to say: edible food, contact (sense-stimulation), volition, consciousness;⁵⁸ and the fifth “plant propagation” or “seed” is “food” itself. The propagation names clearly correspond to those of the foods:

- The propagation by stem (*khandha*, “trunk”) corresponds to the consciousness “food,” as this is the only food that is also *khandha*, “group” or personality-factor.
- The propagation by joint (*phalu*) corresponds to *phassa*, contact “food” (from the common aspect of “coming together” in the meaning of the two words).
- The propagation by seed (*bīja*) corresponds to *āhāra* itself, that is, food as nutriment: the seed cotyledons contain food for the sprout to grow.

⁵⁶ “Basis,” *ārammaṇa*, is a starting-point for initiating activity.

⁵⁷ See Harvey 1995:126 f, 157 f.

⁵⁸ D 3:228; M 1:48, 1:261; S 2:13, 48, 98-105; Vbh 401. Comys: They are so called because they nourish (*aharanti*) their own effects. Although there are other conditions for beings, these four alone are called “food” because they serve as *special conditions* for the personal life-continuity (*ajjhatika,santatiyā visesa,paccayattā*). For edible food (*kabalinkāra āhāra*) is a special condition for the physical body of those beings who subsist on edible food. In the mental body, contact is the special condition for feeling, mental volition for consciousness, and consciousness for name-and-form. **The products of food** (what it nourishes): (1) Edible food put into the mouth produces the groups of form with nutritive essence as the eighth (*oja’atthamaka,rūpāni*, an Abhidhamma term for the simplest cluster of material states); (2) contact as food (*phass’āhāra*) produces the three kinds of feeling [pleasurable, painful, neutral]; (3) mental volition as food (*mano,sañcetanāhāra*) produces the three kinds of existence [sense-world, form-world, formless world]; and (4) consciousness as food (*viññāṇ’āhāra*) produces name-and-form (*nāma,rūpa*) at rebirth (MA 1:207 ff; SA 2:22-27; KhpA 75 ff). See also Vism 11.1-3/341. In **Āhāra S** (S 46.61/5:102-107) & **Abhisāṇḍa Ss** (S 55.31-33/5:391-392) *āhāra* is used in a broader sense of “special condition” without reference to the 4 kinds of food. See also S:B 731 n19 (*These four kinds of nutriments have craving as their source.*)

- (d) The order of the five propagation methods is changed from the normal sequence,⁵⁹ so that they correspond to the order of foods: thus the *agga* propagation would correspond to the formations “food.” This leaves the first, the root (*mūla*), to correspond to consciousness itself.

So we have the following correspondence table:

<u>The 5 ways of plant propagation</u>	<u>Consciousness with its food</u>
Propagation by root (<i>mūla</i>)	consciousness (<i>viññāna</i>)
Propagation by stem (<i>khandha</i>)	consciousness as food (<i>viññāṇ’āhāra</i>)
Propagation by cutting (<i>agga</i>)	formations as food (<i>saṅkhārāhāra</i>)
Propagation by joint (<i>phalu</i>)	contact as food (<i>phass’āhāra</i>)
Propagation by seed (<i>bīja</i>)	solid food, ie food as nutriment (<i>kabalinkār’āhāra</i>).

According to Harvey, the significance of this correspondence is that the “early Suttas” accepted a form of consciousness that is not the same as the “consciousness as food” (1995:158). As food, it is what sustains beings in their existence, that is, as their physical and mental fuel. As such, here, it is no different from the dependent arising sequence as given in **the Moliya Phagguna Sutta** (S 12.12/2:13):

Consciousness as food → future rebirth → the 6 sense-spheres → contact (sense-stimulation).⁶⁰

Here, “consciousness as food” plays the role of the “consciousness” causal link (*nidāna*), and is itself defined as the six types of consciousness (S 12.2/2:4), each arising at their respective sense-doors. Harvey concludes that consciousness-as-food

must thus be the equivalent of these, with the root-like discernment [consciousness] of [**the Bīja Sutta**, S 3:54 f] being a form which does not occur in the processing of sensory or mental objects, just as *bhavaṅga* does not. The root-like nature of this discernment [consciousness] would also make it like *bhavaṅga*, for this not only precedes but also makes possible the “process of *cittas*” which arises in the sensory channels: it is like the root from which they grow.

(Harvey 1995:158 f)

The roles of *bhavaṅga*

11 Thought process

Only one of the five sense-consciousnesses can occur at one time. As such, there must be a constant and extremely rapid “synapsing” or flickering between the sense-doors, for example, with seeing rapidly following hearing, and so on, so that, at the level of normal conscious experience, it all *seems* simultaneous. In this context, *bhavaṅga* is explained as the transition or “resting-state” of consciousness.

During waking consciousness, the mind momentarily lapses back into *bhavaṅga citta* after having processed each sense-object. It is then disturbed by another object, so that a moment of conception arises as “advertence” to the object. If it is a visual object, there is then a moment of visual consciousness, and then a series of conception or mind-consciousness (*mano, viññāna*) that assesses and determines what the object is, culminating in “impulsion” (*javana*). Here, the mind reacts to the perceived object in some way, thus generating karmic results.

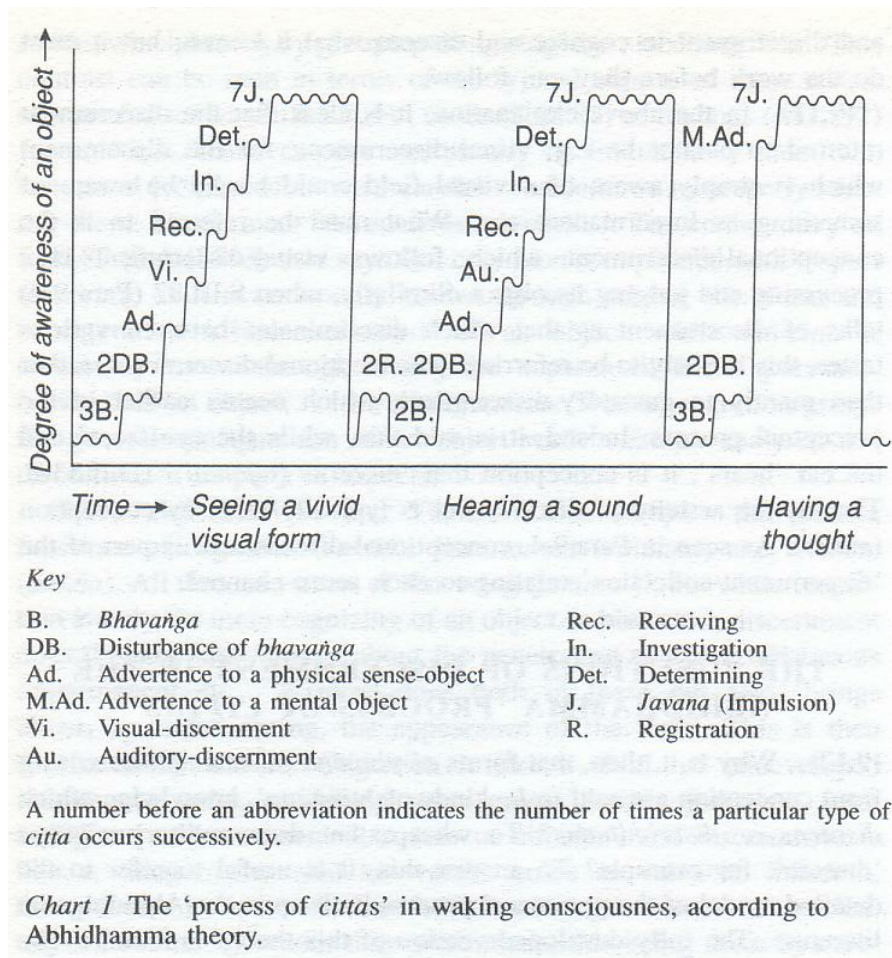
If the impression of the object is strong, there is a moment or two of “registration” (*tad-ālambaṇa*), before the mind again relapses into the *bhavaṅga* state. An example of such a sequence is depicted below [Chart 1], in which each wave represents a *citta* (thought-moment) arising and passing away, to be followed by another with a different function.

It should be noted that the number of *bhavaṅga* thought-moments between each perceptual cycle is not specified in the Abhidhamma or by Buddhaghosa, but it would make sense to say that it varies in

⁵⁹ That is, in **Brahmajāla S** (D 1.1.11/1:5) and **Udumbarika Sihanāda S** (D 25.11/3:44): *mūla, khandha, phalu, agga, bīja*.

⁶⁰ S 12.12/2:13 = SD 20.5.

inverse proportion to a person's degree of alertness or wakefulness. The more alert the person is, the quicker he or she adverts to a new object.⁶¹



(Source: Peter Harvey, *Selfless Mind*. 1995:146)

12 Sleeping and dying

In the usual sequence of dependent arising (*paṭicca,samuppāda*), **existence** (*bhava*) refers to the transition between lives and sometimes to the “intermediate state” (*antarā,bhāva*).⁶² The intermediate state is not a fully conscious state. The early suttas, such as **the Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23.16/2:333 f), talk of the life-principle as leaving a person either on dreaming or in death. The materialist prince Pāyāsi thinks that he has disproved rebirth when he puts a criminal in a sealed jar and lets him die and saw no life-principle leaving the jar when it is opened. The venerable Kumāra Kassapa⁶³ explains to Pāyāsi how his gruesome experiment does not disprove rebirth, as, for example, when the prince dreams, his attendants do not see his life-principle “entering or leaving” him; as such, the life principle is not denied, but accepted, as an invisible phenomenon (Harvey 1995:92=§6.7).

The early Suttas see sleeping and dying as parallel states. Amongst other early references to **sleeping and dying** in similar terms are:

⁶¹ Harvey 1995:265 n3.

⁶² See Harvey 1995:101-103 & “Is Rebirth Immediate?” (SD 2,17).

⁶³ Harvey errs here saying it is *Mahā* Kassapa.

- (1) **The Pāyāsi Sutta** (D 23/15/2:333 f) uses the expression “gone to one’s day-bed” (*diva,seyyam*)” for taking a siesta, while **the Metta Sutta** (Sn 29) closes with the remark that one with moral virtue, right view, and freedom from sense-pleasures will go no more to “a womb-bed” (*gabbha,-seyyam*), in the sense of “he would not be reborn.”
- (2) **The Vinaya** uses *okkamati* both in the sense of “descent” of consciousness into the womb at conception (Harvey 1995 §6.9) and also of “falling” into sleep (V 1:15).

The bright light. People with near-death experiences (NDE) or out-of-body experiences (OBE) often report seeing a bright light at the end of a tunnel. Harvey argues (1995 ch 10) that this refers to the consciousness found in deep sleep, and at the moment of death is seen (according to the Theravāda) as “shining radiantly” (*pabhassara*, A 1:8-10, 10 f).

It also makes sense of the reference in the *Bardo Thötröl* (“Tibetan Book of the Dead”) to people confronting a pure white light in the intermediary existence: in the first of the three stages of this, the mind is said to be in an unconscious and luminous state which is somehow equated with Amitābha, “Infinite Radiance,” Buddha (Fremantle & Trungpa, 1978:37). Such ideas also seem to connect with the idea, in other Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, that this Buddha will come to meet his devotees at death. (Harvey 1995:104).

13 The radiant mind and *bhavaṅga*

The Commentaries⁶⁴ identify the radiant mind with the *bhavaṅga* (subconscious or life-continuum). However, in the commentarial context of mental processes, *bhavaṅga* refers to a subconscious moment that occurs between each conscious moment of mental process.⁶⁵ However, notes Analayo, “[i]n contrast, the luminous state of mind at A 1:10 clearly refers to a conscious experience, since it is to be ‘known’ (*pajānāti*).⁶⁶

As mentioned earlier [1], Upali Karunaratne, in his *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* entry on “Kilesa,” explains that the radiant mind (*pabhassara citta*) is not an absolutely pure state of mind nor is it synonymous with spiritual liberation, but that it is “pure only in the sense, and to the extent, that it is not disturbed or influenced by external stimuli” (1991c:219). More specifically it refers to the state of mind in dhyanas, free from all mental hindrances and other defilements.

When the mind is still in dhyana (*jhāna*), it is said to be a series of impulsion consciousness (*javana citta*), with no *bhavaṅga* consciousness intervening.⁶⁷ To develop the higher knowledges, however, the meditator must emerge from the dhyana so that there is again *bhavaṅga* before adverting to an appropriate object (Vism 394, 408). There is a very rapid alternation between *bhavaṅga* and *javana* (Vism 139). As earlier stated in the *Ānguttara*, the mind “changes very rapidly” (A 1.5.8/1:10) [4(5)].

The commentarial view of the undefiled state of the radiant mind is, then, one where there is a rapid synapsing between the radiant *bhavaṅga* and undefiled moments of impulsion (*javana*). *Javana* is the karmically active state in which defilements “arrive” (AA 1:60) like visitors arriving at a house (DA 1:195). However, when the mind has overcome the five mental hindrances, that is, on the level of the dhyanas (*jhāna*), the “guests” (defilements) stop arriving, at least for the time being.

⁶⁴ AA 1:60; DhsA 140.

⁶⁵ In fact, sleep is referred to as *bhavaṅgam otāreti* (MAṬ 1:364): see Analayo 2003:192 & n40.

⁶⁶ 2003:192 n40. On *bhavaṅga*, see the excellent exposition in Gethin 1994; also Harvey 1989:94-98; Sarachandra 1994:90. Wijesekera (1976:348) tries to establish a historically early existence of *bhavaṅga* basing his arguments on *Ānguttara* passage and several occurrences in *Paṭṭhāna*, but A 2:79 of the PTS, Be and Se, invariably reads *bhav’agga* (“best of existences,” Analayo observes, fits the context better) instead of *bhavaṅga*, and the occurrences in the *Paṭṭhāna* could also be taken as betraying the comparatively late age of this part of the *Abhidharma*; cf Nyānatiloka 1988:246.

⁶⁷ See Harvey 1995:162-164, 170.

The dhyana state is a series of impulsion states (*javana*) with no *bhavaṅga* states intervening.⁶⁸ To develop higher states, however, the mind has to emerge from the dhyana back into *bhavaṅga* before advertent to an appropriate object (Vism 394, 408). At this point there is an extremely rapid alternation between the radiant mind (*bhavaṅga*) and the undefiled *javana* moments. Here, the *javana* is the karmically active state in which defilements “arrive” (AA 1:60) like visitors arriving at a house (DA 1:195). The *bhavaṅga* that precedes *javana*, however, is naturally undefiled.

Such a state of mind, free from defilements, according to **the Upakkilesa Sutta** (A 5.23/3:16), is ready for superknowledge (*abhiññā*), and, in **the Pañcaṅgika Sutta** (A 5.28), the mind is compared to a large jar brimful of water that would spill if a strong person were to push it⁶⁹ (A 5.28.12/3:27 f).⁷⁰ The mind is set to overflow its normal boundaries. Having gained one-pointedness, the mind then expands into the six superknowledges. Such a mind

1. enables a person to overcome the restriction of normal physical laws by the exercise of psychic powers (*iddhi*) such as flying;
2. overcomes the barrier of space by hearing sounds at a great distance by the “divine ear”;
3. overcomes the self-other barrier by reading the mind of other beings;
4. overcomes the barrier of time by remembering past lives;
5. overcomes the self-other barrier and the barrier of death by observing the rebirth of other beings in accordance to their karma;
6. overcomes the barriers of spiritual ignorance, conceit and craving, destroying the influxes (*āsava*), the most deep-rooted limitations of the mind, and so experience Nirvana, the unconditioned that is beyond the barrier of conditioned existence, beyond *all* limitations.

(Harvey 1995:173; slightly edited)

14 The radiant mind and Buddha-nature

Both Theravāda and Mahāyāna make reference to the radiant mind, but after the Buddha’s passing, the Mahāyāna broadened the idea of the radiant mind to include the notion of liberation itself. According to the Mahāyāna, since the radiant mind is present in everyone and every living being, it is also present in the Buddha. The concept of the radiant mind is especially of great importance in Mahāyāna. **The Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines** (*Aṣṭa, sāhasrikā Prajñā Pāramitā*) (1st cent BCE-1st cent CE) identifies it with the “heart of awakening” (*bodhi, citta*),⁷¹ the compassion-motivated aspiration to attain Buddhahood for liberating all beings.⁷² Here the link with compassion parallels the early Suttas’ linking of lovingkindness with the radiant mind [5]. The early Suttas, too, connect awakening (*bodhi*) with the radiant mind. However, while the Mahāyāna links it with Buddhahood, the early Suttas connect it with arhatood, that is, when the radiance is “uncovered” [4].

The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra (p77) identifies the radiant mind with the *tathāgata, garbha*, “the Buddha-embryo” or the awakening-potential, and says that it is “by nature radiant, pure, pure from the start” (*prakṛti, prabhāsvara, visuddhy’ādi, visuddhā*). It is “naturally pure but appears to be impure as it is defiled by the stains that arrive” and is “enveloped in the garments of personality-factors, (sensory) elements and

⁶⁸ Harvey 1995:162-166.

⁶⁹ “Were to push it,” *āvajjeyya*, pot 3 sg of *avajjati* = caus *āvajjeti*, (1) tilts, tips up (to pour out); tips over; (2) adverts to, turns (one’s mind) to, give one’s attention to; ponders over, thinks about. There is a wordplay here.

⁷⁰ See V 1:230; D 1:244; S 2:134; U 90.

⁷¹ More often rendered as “thought of enlightenment.” Robert Thurman renders *bodhi, citta* as “spirit of enlightenment,” which is followed by Jan Nattier: “I have adopted Robert Thurman’s felicitous rendering of this term in place of the more common “thought of enlightenment,” since the latter suggests a (primarily) rational, verbal, and reflective commitment to enlightenment, which is not always the case in the texts I have examined” (*A Few Good Men*, 2003:220 n 77).

⁷² *Aṣṭa, sāhasrikā Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtram*, ed PL Vaidya, Dharmabanga: Mithila Institute, 1960:3; cf E Conze et al, *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*. NY & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1973:84.

sense-spheres, and soiled with the dirt of attachment, hatred, delusion and imagining (*parikalpa*)” (Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra 222).⁷³

In the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, the *tathāgata,garbha* is regarded as eternal and permanent in the sense that emptiness (*sūnyatā*) is eternal and permanent (p778). It further equates it with **the ālaya,vijñāna** or store-consciousness of Yogācāra thought.⁷⁴ This is a similar concept to that of the Theravādin *bhavaṅga citta*, both systems incorporating conception (*manas*) and the six forms of sense-consciousness (Harvey 1990: 107-109).

15 Conclusion

In early Buddhism, the “radiant mind” (*pabhassara citta*) refers neither to an absolutely pure state of mind nor to spiritual liberation, but is the dhyanic mind that is radiant on account of not being disturbed or influenced by external stimuli [1, 6]. However, from a careful reading of this important and well known Aṅguttara passage

- 1 Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, but it is defiled by adventitious impurities [that “arrive” through the sense-doors].
The uninstructed [ignorant] ordinary person does not understand things as they really are. Therefore there is no mental development for the uninstructed ordinary person, I say!⁷⁵
- 2 Bhikshus, this mind is radiant, and it is freed from adventitious impurities [that “arrive” through the sense-doors].
The instructed [wise] noble disciple understands things as they really are. Therefore there is mental development for the instructed noble disciple, I say!⁷⁶
(A 1.6.1-2/1:10; also 1.5.9-10/1:10)

we get a hint that the mind is “by nature” radiant (pure, bright, full of lovingkindness). Nothing is said of such a mind being liberated (although a liberated mind is clearly radiant). Such an unawakened radiant mind is often soiled by the impurities that arise from unskillful attention when the mind is dealing with sense-objects. However, such defilements as the five mental hindrances are temporarily suspended when the mind is focussed in *samādhi*, especially on gaining stream-entry or on attaining superknowledge [1, 13].

In the later developed concept of *bhavaṅga*, it is seen as the latent life-continuum which is the “natural” ground-state or resting-state of consciousness. In deep dreamless sleep, the stream of such natural consciousness occurs uninterruptedly. In waking consciousness, there is an alternation between it and more active forms of consciousness directed to sense-objects. It is absent in meditative dhyana, where only pure impulsion consciousness (*javana*) is present.

In dreaming sleep, drowsiness means that there is a very rapid alternation between *bhavaṅga* and weak *javana*, while in the attainment and application of the superknowledges, there is likewise a very rapid alternation, but here the *bhavaṅga* leads to the overcoming of various barriers through potent *javana*. That is to say, it is a sort of transition or “resting-place” between moments of consciousness.

The arhat’s mind, however, is forever free of these defilements. Nevertheless, in all living beings, the radiant mind remains throughout as a pure basis for spiritual growth. This potential is brought to fruition once the mind (*mano*) overcomes unskillful attention so that skillful attention wisely handles all sense-objects and removes the mental defilements.

The Buddhist teaching that the mind is by nature radiant is a very wholesome notion in working with suffering. It means that suffering is mind-made situation, a misperception of true reality, that clouds out

⁷³ Qu by W Rahula 1978:98.

⁷⁴ See Harvey 1995:161 f, 175 f, 217 f.

⁷⁵ *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭham. Tam assutavā puthujjano yathā,bhūtam n’ appajānati. Tasmā assutavato puthujjanassa citta,bhāvanā n’ atthi ti vadāmī ti.* Qu at MA 1:167; DhA 1:23; NmA 1:22; PmA 1:242; DhsA 68.

⁷⁶ *Pabhassaram idam bhikkhave cittam tañ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi vipparamuttam. Tam sutavā ariya,-sāvako yathā,bhūtam pajānati. Tasmā sutavato ariya,sāvakassa citta,bhāvanā atthi ti vadāmī ti.*

the natural radiance, plunging one into greater darkness of delusion and pain. When the mind is attended to directly with mindfulness, one touches the natural radiance, and when one clears away the mental hindrances and other defilements, the mind shine radiantly again.

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